

Baffling Bolivia

A Never-Never Land High Above the Sea

LA PAZ, BOLIVIA.

If Bolivia were half as bad as it looks on paper, the government would send a crew to all this country's points of entry to post signs saying "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

And whereas the task would require only three men, this jaundiced view holds, the crew would contain 60—all ridiculously overpaid and Communists to the last man. Further: It would take them nine days to post each sign, because of their unbelievable laziness. And when they finished, they would come back to La Paz and line up at the United States embassy for the dole.

This is the kind of picture generally painted of Bolivia in the South American press. Unfortunately, there are times when it is not far from the truth. Both before and since the 1952 revolution that ushered in its present government, Bolivia has been a land of excesses, exaggerations, quirks, contradictions, and every manner of oddity and abuse.

Land of General Strikes

Perhaps the altitude—La Paz is 12,000 feet above sea level—has something to do with it. At any rate, this is a land of general strikes, winter halts, Coleman lanterns (to guard against frequent electricity blackouts), altitude sick-



ness (the dread *soroche*), poverty, civic corruption, and almost every kind of madness and affliction that can plague the human body and soul. Open a new tube of toothpaste in La Paz and it erupts all over the basin because it was packed at sea level. Light a cigaret and it goes out. Light it again and it goes out again. The air is so thin, so lacking in oxygen, that fires are no problem. La Paz does not even have a fire department.

One evening, three American citizens were waiting for a storm to abate. There was no hope of going into the streets until it passed. One of the men had an appointment at a nearby hotel, but he couldn't call to say he'd be late because the phone was out of order. In the previous hour he had tried 26 times to make the call, and when he finally got a connection it was a wrong number.

One of the men had served 39 months in the American embassy. He was telling about a 27-year-old ex-Marine who had recently dropped dead from "over-exercising in the altitude." The man had tried to keep up a normal work schedule, and in La Paz it killed him. "Yes," said the embassy man, "I believe Bolivia has more problems per square mile than any other country on earth."

"You think you have problems," said another. "Doctor Brainwaves came in to see me again today."

The first man shook his head sadly. The good doctor is well known at both the American and British embassies. He is a Bolivian who "communicates" with "brain waves," and he contends that his "talks" with Khrushchev during the past few years are responsible for the current world peace. For this service, the doctor thinks the United States Government owes him \$250,000,000.

He does not insist on it all at once, but says that during a recent "communication" with Jacqueline Kennedy he secured an agreement for an immediate down payment of \$10,000,000—the rest to

Quotables

Edwin A. Walker, former Army major general, reporting that someone shot at him with a rifle while he was sitting in his Dallas home: "I've been saying the home front was right here at home. . . . You don't have to go overseas to earn a Purple Heart."

Col. Thomas H. Swan, judge advocate for the United States Army in West Berlin, commenting on friendly relationships between West Berliners and American troops there: "We get treated better here than in any other place in the world, including the United States."

James Donovan, New York lawyer who secured the release of 10 American prisoners from Cuba last week, saying he wasn't sure how many more Americans are left in Cuban jails: "They're going in faster than I can get them out."

Edward Meade, a Catholic seminary student in Washington, D.C., who preached at a corner of Pennsylvania Avenue on Good Friday: "Religion isn't something that should be confined to Sunday morning or to the graveyard hours of radio and television. Street preaching puts religion where it should be—in vital contact with people on the street."

A Rewarding Donation

Merck & Co. reports its donation of \$2,500,000 in drugs toward the ransoming of Cuban prisoners resulted in a net profit to the company. Tax deductions allowed by the Government on the wholesale price of the drugs exceeded the cost of the items donated. The unspecified savings was given to a charity supporting medical education.

come later. He drops in about once a week, and is becoming increasingly indignant at the embassy's refusal to hand over a check.

"Ah, the nuts, the bugs in this place," muttered the embassy man. "This Bolivian waves guy is breaking me down. I tell him if he wants the money he should write the proper agencies, and he says, 'Why should I write? I've already talked with them and they say I should have it.'"

The Fainting Seaman

The conversation then drifted to the case of "the world's highest stranded seaman." An American, he showed up at the embassy one day broke, and while explaining his difficulties fell down in a faint from *soroche*. Thereafter he showed up with dizzying regularity. Being a man of sea levels, he fainted all over La Paz and would be brought to the embassy, apparently dead—each time to be revived with shots, massage, and oxygen.

These are some of the small problems—the laughs, as it were—in a country where people with responsibility have very few things to laugh about. The Americans fear the Communists, the Communists fear the Alliance for Progress, and most people don't care about any of this as long as the money and aid keeps flowing in. Those in the controlling wing of the ruling MNR (Nationalist Revolutionary Movement) live in daily fear of an uprising from either the right or the left.

Bolivia is struggling to live with what is called a "popular economy," a government dependent on Indian support and very literally of, by, and for the people. Richard Patch, who spent several years in Bolivia on a project for the American Universities Field Staff, tells what came about as a result of the 1952 revolution:

"The MNR pushed the most ambitious program of social and economic reforms in the Western Hemisphere since the Mexican Revolution. It has attempted in 10 years to reach a goal that Mexico is still pursuing after 45 years. Bolivia's agrarian reform, nationalization of the mines, citizenship for the Indians, universal vote, and elimination of army influence in politics have brought that country more critical problems than most nations must deal with in a generation. The changes, many made because of political, not practical, necessities, have brought the country to a state of chaos that must be seen to be believed."

A Freeze on Fares

The British-owned Bolivia Railway Co., for instance, pulled out three years ago and left the railroads to the government. Featherbedding, labor harassment, and a freeze on fares convinced the owners that the lines were a waste of time. The government ran the lines for three years. Chaos resulted and they lost \$300,000 a month.

Finally the government asked the British management to give it another try. The agreement (for two years) was signed, and Malcolm Wilson, the manager, decided the first necessity was to get rid of 300 unneeded men. But when he sent the dismissal order for posting, the officials carrying it were kidnapped by workmen and held hostage until the order was rescinded. "This is not the best way," says Mr. Wilson, "to have to run a business."

The most obvious and gripping problem ("the really sinister thing about this place," as one American puts it) is La Paz's winter electricity shortage. The juice comes and goes with little or no warning. Crowded elevators are caught between floors in hotels and office buildings. On many cold nights, the only heat in private homes comes from fireplaces, and firewood is brutally expensive because it must be trucked miles up from the valleys. At this altitude the only things that grow are potatoes and a few cereal grains.

The situation isn't so bad in summer (which is the North American winter), when rains and melting snows fill the nation's reservoirs and provide generally adequate power. In a month or two, however, winter will be beginning here, and the whole annoyance will start all over again.

Why the Lights Are Dim

Many Bolivians blame the United States-controlled Bolivian Power Co. for this problem. Yet the company maintains that electricity costs less in La Paz than any place else in the world. Out of 53,000 subscribers, 21,000 pay less than 20 cents a month for service, and 8,500 pay less than 4 cents.

Many pay nothing at all, however; whole Indian communities steal their electricity by tapping the main lines. When this happens, the lights usually dim in La Paz.

Much the same kind of situation exists with squatters who have built shacks around the runways at El Alto Airport. "It's a menace to aviation," says one official, "but try to make them move and they threaten you with guns."

Behind all this lurks the Red menace, but even that has taken its own warped shape in Bolivia. More than anything else, perhaps, it is seen as an easy way to frighten the Americans. There are about as many Communists in Bolivia as there are bedrock conservatives—which leaves a lot of middle ground.

Most labor leaders, generally lumped together as "Reds," are undoubtedly leftist, but only a handful have any connection with Moscow. Most are simply naive nationalists. One of the kings of the Workers' Federation learned to read English by reading Playboy magazine; he admits this only after many drinks and at least an hour of railing at "Wall Street." Another, equally high on the ladder, thinks Steinbeck and Dos Passos are young American writers, with whom he feels a deep kinship.

A morass of bureaucratic studies has been written on the country. Sociologist Louis Hanke says that Bolivia has probably had more foreigners prescribe for her ills than any other country in South America, and enough surveys have been drawn up to fill a five-foot shelf. One

United Nations mission, alone, in 1950 included experts in taxation, public finance, fiscal administration, mining production, transportation, electrical power production, labor legislation, social welfare, living standards, public education, soil analysis, cotton cultivation, and irrigation. A recent report on mining methods, by a New York consultant, fills three volumes. A rich and somewhat baffling literature has resulted from all these investigations.

But life goes on in La Paz—a city of steep hills and high prices, sunny days and cold nights, demonstrations by wide-eyed opposition groups; drunken Indians reeling and shouting through the streets at night—a manic atmosphere, compared to the gray formality of Lima, or the tomb-like dullness of Quito.

—HUNTER S. THOMPSON

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